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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000149

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: RED-SHIRT CORE LEADERS TELL AMBASSADOR
ABOUT GOALS, UPCOMING PROTESTS

REF: A. 09 BANGKOK 2905 (FIREWORKS AT YELLOW-SHIRT RALLY)

[1](#)B. 09 BANGKOK 2642 (FUTURE OF CONSTITUTIONAL
AMENDMENTS UNCERTAIN)

[1](#)C. 09 BANGKOK 1817 (AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH RED-SHIRT
LEADERS)

[1](#)D. 08 BANGKOK 3426 (LETHAL EXPLOSION AT BANGKOK
PROTEST SITE)

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR ERIC G. JOHN, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with top strategists of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, or "red-shirts") on January 14 to engage them on UDD plans for anti-government protests in the new year. The Ambassador stressed the importance of the movement eschewing violence as a tactic if it wanted to retain credibility both domestically and internationally. UDD leaders repeatedly emphasized that they preached non-violence, though they did not offer assurances that they could exclude fellow traveler and advocate of violence MGEN Khattiya (aka Seh Daeng) from their upcoming rallies. The UDD leaders reiterated their goals for the coming months, including a large rally in mid February, emphasized the grassroots growth in the movement, and described the relationship between fugitive former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, the UDD, the opposition Puea Thai party, and activists like Seh Daeng, acknowledging it could ultimately be considered one team.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: The UDD message was consistent with what they have told us in previous meetings and what has been broadcast from the stage at their rallies. Our sense is that such protests in January-February are unlikely to achieve their stated goal of forcing the current government from power. Reports that the red-shirts planned to rally at Suvarnaphum Airport appeared in the press five days after our meeting; the Mission will convey to the UDD leadership that such protests would be damaging to their cause as well as harmful to Thailand as a whole.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment, cont'd: UDD claims that the red-shirt movement advocates peaceful change ring somewhat hollow, however, in the continued refusal to make a strong statement against affiliated figures like Seh Daeng, who loudly promote violence as a catalyst for political change. In the end, it is Thaksin, not Veera, calling the shots for the red-shirt

movement; as long as Thaksin continues to invite Seh Daeng to strategy sessions in Cambodia and Dubai along with Veera and Puea Thai MPs, future violence cannot be ruled out. To that end, the Mission will continue to engage UDD leadership to vigorously advocate against the use of violence. End Summary and Comment.

A RED START TO 2010

14. (C) Ambassador hosted core UDD leaders Veera Musikapong and Jaran Ditapichai, as well as UDD deputy international coordinator Sean Boonprakong, for coffee at the Residence January 14 to discuss UDD plans and intentions for the coming months and reiterate our concerns about the potential for violence in the upcoming cycle of protests. As with the Ambassador's previous meeting with this group (REF C), Veera was the primary voice for the UDD, with Sean interpreting. Note: The UDD has publicly announced a series of five smaller demonstrations will occur through the latter half of January, precursors to another so-called "final confrontation" in the second half of February intended to remove the Abhisit Vejjajiva government. The timing is no accident: the Supreme Court is scheduled to hand down its final decision on the seizure of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's assets, valued at 76 billion baht (US\$2 billion), on February 26.

15. (C) Thanking the Ambassador and POLoffs for meeting red-shirt leaders regularly and asking how they were doing, Veera began his comments by stating that UDD leaders were pleased with their interaction with the embassy and believed that the embassy had done a good job of remaining "neutral" in the partisan political waters of Thailand. Sean offered assurances that the Thai-U.S. security alliance would continue when the red-shirts returned to power.

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16. (C) Jaran later told the Ambassador that many red-shirt supporters still believed the United States was allied with the palace and the government. The Ambassador explained that the red-shirt perception was wrong, since our mandate was to meet with all sides, but understandable since the nature of the Embassy's work in promoting bilateral relations always involves significant interaction with the host government. When Thaksin was Prime Minister in 2001-06 and his allies Samak and Somchai in office in 2008, Ambassador continued, the Democrats and yellow-shirts in opposition made similar accusations of pro-government bias against the embassy. The United States advocated that all sides follow the rule of law, act equitably, and avoid violence.

GOALS: NEW GOVERNMENT, OLD CONSTITUTION, OVERTHROW ELITE

17. (C) Veera identified three main UDD goals, separate from Thaksin's pending court case, which "angered 60 percent of our supporters." The primary goal was to pressure the current government to quit or for PM Abhisit to dissolve the House and call new elections. The second goal was the restoration of the 1997 Constitution, rejecting efforts to amend the 2007 constitution (REF B); Veera said the current constitution was unacceptable and proposals to amend it were meaningless. The third aim was the removal from politics of "khon amart" -- which roughly translates to "aristocratic elite" -- specifically identified by Veera as the Privy Council.

18. (C) When the Ambassador asked what the UDD saw as the urgency for another "final battle," Veera replied that issues at play had been building up "to a boiling point" over the last year, attributing the timing to coincidence rather than the February 26 court decision regarding Thaksin's assets. He acknowledged Thaksin's court case certainly was a factor, but he also cited political issues in parliament, the handling of the case against alleged illegal contributions to the Democrat Party in 2004-05, and corruption in government programs as reasons for protest in the near term. Jaran

joked that the timing of the Cobra Gold exercise in early February was auspicious, since the military would be distracted and not able to focus on the subsequent red rally.

GRASSROOTS MOMENTUM BUILDING, UDD CLAIMS

19. (C) Veera and Jaran both claimed that the UDD had actually gained strength since the April 2009 riots (note: declining protest participation since would suggest otherwise. End note). Membership had doubled since April, but the UDD leadership struggled to find the correct strategy to take advantage of the increased support, Veera said. When the Ambassador asked what motivated red-shirt supporters to come out in the streets, particularly now, Veera struggled to answer concisely. He stated that red-shirt supporters were angry with the government for how it had handled the April demonstrations, particularly in the use of force to disperse protesters, and they felt that their demands from 2009 had been completely ignored. Jaran added that the UDD's grassroots elements had been demanding action and the leadership had been holding them back until now. The UDD wanted prosecutions against the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, or "yellow-shirts") for seizing the airports in November 2008 and demanded Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya resign.

110. (C) In response to grassroots demand for action, the UDD had instituted "Democracy Schools," one and a half day seminars teaching about democracy, peaceful protest tactics, constitutional monarchies and the pernicious influence of entrenched elites. Veera said six such sessions had already been completed, each class with between eight and nine thousand students. Participants had returned to their home villages and taught their neighbors the things they had learned. Jaran claimed that just about every district in the red-shirt stronghold of Udon Thani Province in the northeast had at least one person who had attended the seminars.

111. (C) Jaran claimed the security forces and PAD were afraid

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of the Democracy Schools because they did not understand the curriculum. The classes were open to all, but Veera said with such high demand they had to limit the number of participants in each session. Jaran invited the Embassy to send a representative to attend the next class so we could see for ourselves what they teach; at the end of the session Jaran made a pitch for a democracy small grant to his organization conducting the seminars.

112. (C) As another example of red-shirt grassroots efforts, Veera cited informal social gatherings self-initiated by communities called "Chinese banquets," involving 40 tables of ten people each, with a UDD leader as guest speaker talking about the political situation. Such efforts were an indication that the political pressure for change was definitely increasing, he claimed.

VIOLENCE IS NOT THE ANSWER (BUT CAN'T BE RULED OUT)

113. (C) Veera and Jaran both responded to the Ambassador's admonition that the UDD foreswear violent behavior such as occurred last April during red-shirt riots in Pattaya and Bangkok. As they had in our meetings with them dating back to September 2008, the UDD leaders insisted that the UDD eschewed violence as a means to meet their goals, and that such acts hurt their legitimacy and undermined their level of popular support. Jaran emphasized the repeated messages against violence given from the stage at the last few UDD rallies.

114. (C) The Ambassador specifically asked several times if the UDD would disavow association with MGEN Khatthiya Sawasdiphol, aka Seh Daeng. Seh Daeng is popular with more militant factions in the red-shirt movement, has openly advocated violence against yellow-shirt protests and

government security forces, and claimed responsibility for fatal grenade attacks at PAD rallies in 2008 and 2009 (REFS A and D). Veera acknowledged that UDD leaders had held a three-hour meeting January 13 to discuss what to do about Seh Daeng, after Army Commander Anuphong Paochinda officially suspended Seh Daeng from the army on January 13 for his unauthorized activities. While the UDD did not allow Seh Daeng to appear on the stage at their rallies and did not consider him to be part of the UDD, he acknowledged that Seh Daeng had been photographed in Dubai with Thaksin at the same time Veera was visiting the fugitive former prime minister.

¶15. (C) The UDD repeatedly condemned the use of violence from the microphone at their rallies, Veera asserted, but the UDD could not publicly disassociate Seh Daeng from the red-shirt movement because so many people like his attitude. Seh Daeng did what he wanted, Veera said, noting that not even the Army could control him. (NOTE: After the GEN Anupong's suspension of Seh Daeng; several hundred red-shirts protested in front of the Ministry of Defense and at Army headquarters the morning of the Ambassador-UDD coffee. End Note.)

PEAS IN A POD: UDD, PUEA THAI, AND THAKSIN

¶16. (C) The Ambassador inquired about the overlap between Thaksin, the UDD, and Puea Thai. Veera ultimately acknowledged that they could all be considered part of one team, while going on to assert that the UDD was not just about Thaksin, that the movement's origins were grounded in desire for true democracy. The UDD embraced Thaksin's cause because the people demanded it, he said. The UDD had to carefully manage the relationship with Puea Thai, however, as the differences between the UDD and Puea Thai were greater than the casual observer could notice, and had been since the 2006 coup. (Note: we have heard this assertion repeatedly, but Veera did not elaborate).

WILL YOU VISIT US IN JAIL, AND MAKE THE PAD GO TOO?

¶17. (C) Citing the example of U.S. diplomats publicly supporting the case of imprisoned Chinese dissidents in Beijing, Jaran asked if Embassy officials would make similar statements and visit top UDD leaders if their bail (on charges of inciting the April violence) was revoked and they

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were imprisoned after the next round of protests. Veera and Jaran both raised the issue of prosecuting the PAD for the airport takeover, citing international norms and asked if the US Government could do something to bring more attention to the case. The Ambassador said he had raised similar points to the Thai Government on several occasions, including the need to enforce the rule of law. He suggested the UDD focus on the points about the airport seizure that they could find common cause with the government rather than insisting on issues (such as terrorism charges) on which they knew neither side could come to agreement.

JOHN